
Reviewed by Camila Pastor (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (August, 2024)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

In her *In Defense of Solidarity and Pleasure*, Firuzeh Shokooh Valle explores the tense and liberatory intersections between increasingly corporatized global development institutions that target women in the developing world for inclusion in the bounties of capitalist growth through technology while leaving intact the material, social, and discursive structures that enact exclusion in the first place, and the digital activists who both implement and resist such strategies. Drawing extensively on Latin American feminist philosophers’, anthropologists’, and activists’ analysis of the intimate entanglements of capitalism and colonialism, Shokooh Valle brings critical development studies and the multivocal scholarship on care work into incisive conversation with feminists of the Global South to explore the making and unmaking of the Third World Technological Woman.

Thinking with Brazilian feminist philosopher Suely Rolnik, Shokooh Valle explores the micropolitics of capitalist practice and the corresponding “spheres of insurrection” (p. 21).[1] With Italian feminist philosopher/historian Silvia Federici and Argentinian anthropologist Rita Laura Segato, she finds her focus on “the body as the first colony,” and on the sustained expropriation of feminized care work as the basis for a new, technology-based strategy of capitalist accumulation and assault on resources held in common (p. 8).[2] Segato, Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart, and Tamara Kneese afford a focus on territory and the life in relationship or politics of connection that sustains and builds communities through a practice of care work that centers interdependence, communality, and relationality.[3] Foregrounding Mexican philosopher Graciela Hierro’s invitation to rethink pleasure as a feminist ethical project central to feminist liberation, Shokooh Valle crucially—and subversively—proposes a focus on pleasure as collective insurgent practice and tactic of defiance.[4] Though clearly anchored in Latin America, she also draws on South Asian develop-
ment critics as well as feminist interventions stemming from Arab and Muslim spaces, for example Egyptian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod’s call to seek antidotes to polarizing, racializing discourse in ethnography and British-Pakistani philosopher Sara Ahmed’s emphasis on practice, on living a feminist life.

Though the book is organized according to “sites” of fieldwork, these remain in constant interaction across chapters, as Shokooh Valle documents feminist activists’ reappropriations of development discourse constructions of women as policy targets. Her multisited ethnography explores three very different sites where the Third World Technological Woman is co-constructed. The first are online textual archives produced by global development agencies—largely the United Nations, as well as technological corporations and foundations. The second is a grassroots feminist cooperative in San José, Costa Rica, where Shokooh Valle conducted ethnographic fieldwork, participating in everyday efforts and outreach and interviewing the activists and their clients. The third site is a complex, dispersed object in itself, a transnational network organizing in the field of internet rights to problematize online violence.

Shokooh Valle includes a methodological appendix, through which she situates her own trajectory as witness to the digital revolution in the newsrooms of Puerto Rican journalism and her recognition of technologies as political artifacts, mobilized by variously situated actors. This realization sparked her interest in Latin American and more broadly Global South feminist media strategies, and the centrality of technopolitics to a new generation of feminists. Her double anchoring in hispanophone and anglophone scholarship affords an analysis enriched through an intimate awareness of the violences and resistances complicating the Latin American and Caribbean region—from the murder of environmentalist Berta Cáceres in Honduras to the Zapatista movement and feminist mobilization against feminicide in Mexico, the articulation of community feminism by Bolivian activist Julieta Paredes, and the community organizing toward vivir sabroso—joyful living—by Afro-Colombian vice president Francia Márquez.

The first chapter, “The Politics of Discourse,” provides careful textual analysis of policy at the intersection of gender and digital technologies for the Global South from the mid-1990s through the present. Policy discourse constructs a particular target in order to define and implement development strategies, and to showcase these as tokens of its own positive value. Global development analysts imagine an ideal feminized subject who combines technological dexterity and entrepreneurial instinct with selfless care, embodying the deserving object of development investment capable of providing technical solutions to social problems. Development discourse itself is far from monolithic, however, and Shokooh Valle is careful to contrast the gendering and racializing tactics deployed in global agencies’ discourse to policy emanating from regionally anchored agencies like ECLAC (the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), which despite their embrace of women’s potential as digital entrepreneurs, situate analyses and policy recommendations in broader historical, social and political contexts relevant to the Latin American region.

Chapter 2, “Solidarity,” situates the everyday workings of the cooperative Sula Batsu, which Shokooh Valle identifies as a leader in the field of gender and technology in Latin America, in several nested contexts. Describing the workspace, everyday politics, and the core actors launching programs in conversation with local women and their needs, including hackathons, public art projects, and technology training, the author probes the joys and tensions around the challenges to sustaining such a project in collectivized ways of living and working. Global development discourse, the material limits imposed by the shifting funding landscape that it generates, and the Costa Ric-
an state’s policies on gender and technology frame entrepreneurial solutions, breeding dissent and possibility.

In the third chapter, “Pleasure,” the author documents the two main strategies pursued by the transnational Association for Progressive Communications (APC) through their Women's Rights Program (WRP), tracking the organization’s participation in policy venues and interviewing members scattered across the globe. APC WRP has a twofold strategy to counter online gender violence. Situating online violence through a Southern epistemology that recognizes the continuity between online violence and broader structural contexts, they advocate for novel forms of online pleasure and joy. Emphasizing their collaborative design and process, the author tracks campaigns Feminist Principles of the Internet, Take Back the Tech, and the EROTICS (Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet) project. Though Shokooh Valle and the activists she follows are interested in cultivating space and legitimacy for sexual and erotic pleasure across the hetero and LGBT+ spectrum, the author, following Argentinian philosopher Maria Lugones's work on playfulness as central to a decolonial feminism, is interested in theorizing dissident communities’ enactment of pleasure as broadly construed in joy, desire, play, and experimentation.[6]

With chapter 4, “Uneasy Alliances,” Shokooh Valle foregrounds the difficult accommodations that activists are constrained to make and provides an ethnographic zoom-in on the decision-making processes and choices that become necessary when navigating a landscape of funding dominated by the NGO-ization of development and the corporatization of a broad segment of NGOs since the initial flourishing of NGOs as potentially radical alternatives to the poverty of the state in the 1990s. Aggravated by the 2008 financial crisis, the global trend toward a privatization of development donors has entailed the mainstreaming of a corporate culture demanding quantified and categorized results-focused approaches, to the detriment of practices that center processes, relationships, and the needs of communities. This has also translated into minimal development funds reaching feminist and women-led organizations, in spite of women and girls increasingly becoming the target and the publicized “face” of development. In recognizing activists as employees and entrepreneurs who often depend on problematic funding to sustain their work, she notes that a close ethnography of the concrete negotiation of uneasy alliances is more productive than opposing autonomy to co-optation, feminist, and nonfeminist projects.

*In Defense of Solidarity and Pleasure* is critical sociology at its best. Through fine-grained archival and ethnographic analysis of transnational feminist networks at work in a global development landscape not of their own making, Shokooh Valle highlights the material and ethical limits to technopolitical utopias. She situates actors in broad institutional and social contexts and shows the evolution of partnerships and negotiations over several decades. Her theoretical recuperation of Latin American feminist thought in particular allows her to recognize one of the most revolutionary demands of feminist activists in the region: the recognition of care work not just as an often gendered, racialized, precarious, and unvalued form of labor, but as a collective practice that creates the opportunity to define pleasure and joy as core dimensions of solidarity. These relationships of solidarity not only denounce marginalization but announce, Shokooh Valle notes, in the practice of building collaborative selves, the possibility of collective worlds in which everyone can flourish together.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59939

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.